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Shift in Style with the Shift of Gender: Exploring Gender-Based Style Differences in ESL Writing

Abstract *The present study examines the difference in ESL academic writing of boys' and girls' in their written assignments. It aims at exploring differences in ESL writing based on the variable of gender. The data site for this study was a Diploma class at the Department of English FC, NUML Islamabad, where it was collected from 24 participants, i.e., 12 boys and 12 girls, who were asked to write an essay. The conceptual framework of Swan (1992) underpins the present study. The data were analyzed through a qualitative and quantitative method. The study found that the subtopics highlighted in their writings were different and approached variedly. The study also showed that the girls' writings are more reflective and subjective, and they made use of personal pronouns more often, whereas boys prefer being objective and used a third-person pronoun. Also, their writings were more fact and figure based, which was absent in the essays written by girls.*

Key Words: Gender, ESL Writing Style, Essay, Pronouns

Introduction

It is quite interesting to learn that students of both genders being provided the same learning environment end up writing about different aspects of life quite differently. The development of ideas between both genders is strikingly different. One of the factors, i.e., "gender", influences the language skills of an individual. A lot of work has been conducted to find out the differences, and most of the studies have come up with results in which writings of men were found to be focused and to the point whereas that of women were found to be more organized with detail descriptions and arguments (Wastika, 2008). Like other skills, writing is also a reflection of a person that is drawn on the paper in the form of pictures of the mind of the writer. The present study attempts to find out the difference in the writing styles of Pakistani male and female ESL learners.

Femininity and masculinity in language are frequently constructed in discrete and oppositional categories. (Swann, 1992). Gender, a social construct, is a culturally shaped attributes given to male and female. The term "shape" in "culturally shaped" refers to including "shapers" family, schools, media and other institutes with their linguistic and non-linguistic practices. Language is a socially value-laden phenomenon, and it reflects a lot about gender (Humm, 1989).

Gender and educational opportunities are the subjects of an ongoing debate. The study of language and gender is now moving from finding "difference" towards an "identities" paradigm, and there is a long list of topics that are taken under consideration by some researchers of language and gender. Some of the topics like gender and language learning, achievement and subject choice, second and foreign language acquisition, four skills, teacher perceptions, language and learner identities etc., were the concern of research study (Sunderland, 2000).

Language learning means acquiring the four skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing. ESL writing is an important aspect of language. The factors that are responsible for influencing the writing ability of the individual range from psychological, social to cultural and gender (Zhang, 2008; Gao & Zhang, 2011).

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Literature Review

There is a tradition of studying language and gender, specifically focusing on classroom interactions (Sunderland, 1996). A lot of studies have been conducted on speech between student and teacher talk in the classroom or talk between mixed genders in classrooms while using different measures of verbosity (Swann and Graddol, 1988). They found that boys talked more than girls. Surprisingly the result was found to be the same in all the research works conducted by Brooks (1982), Whyte, (1984) and Bashiruddin et al. (1990). It was also found out that in subjects like Math, Science, English Language and Arts etc., boys were found to be more active than girls (Sadker,1982). Other than the factor of gender, many studies were conducted on factors like the race of students and the gender of teachers (Good et al. (1973).

In addition to the topics, language learners have a personal aptitude for learning some aspects of language more quickly than others, and the same is true for the use as well. The difference between the language of the male and female has been a topic of research for decades. It is a famous study in the area of Sociolinguistics. Trudgill (1972), Lakoff (1975) and Labov (1990) discussed the differences in language used by both sexes. Studies on language and gender are mostly conducted in the spoken language to examine different aspects of language use in various language settings (Lakoff, 1973; Swan, 1992; Jones & Myhill, 2004; Eckert, & McConnell-Ginet 2003), whereas written language is given less importance in this respect.

The role of gender in spoken language was first addressed in the studies by Labov (1990) and Trudgill (1972), which showed the differences in the phonological aspects of the language spoken by the genders. Later studies by Holmes, 1990 and Eckert, 1997 found another dimensional fact related to the study of gender and language. The studies related to speech uncovered interesting facts about the variation in language based on gender differences. Studies revealed that females are inclined to talk more about relationships than do males (Aries &Johnson 1983; Tannen 1990), and their speech have more compliments and apologies than the conversation of males. Holmes (1984,1988,1989) found that women are in the habit of using facilitative tag questions; however, men do not use them in the manner women use.

Research conducted on written discourse mostly shows the representation of men and women in terms of social roles and patterns. Sunderland (2000) research project, when investigated EFL books, found that men were over-represented, and in spoken scripted dialogues, women spoke less and on fewer occasions as compared to men. There is a concern across the Western world that boys are less successful than girls in reading and writing (Collins, Kenway & Mcleod, 2000). This concern was brought into the field of research by the publication of the report "Boys and English" in 2000 (Great Britain, 2000). This report, for the first time, highlighted differences in achievements in the literacy of girls and boys. It was not a formal research project, but some of the evidence suggested that the discrepancies may be attributable to limited opportunities for boys to practice writing etc., then gender differences per se. The research focused more on reading than writing. After this report, several other studies were conducted to find out the impact of gender on writing development, and most of the test reports have shown that boys have not matched girls' achievement. (Dept. For Education and Skills, 2006). Reasons for this difference have been diverse. Browne (1994) suggested that boys consider writing as passive activity hence female activity.

Barrs and Pidgeon (2002) argued that the level of motivation for revising and revisiting their own written work in boys is quite low. Jones & Myhill (2004), in their research, found that boys underachievement in English is because they don't like English and writing. Boys are found to be naturally weak in language as compared to girls. On the other hand, Millard (1997) research findings suggested that boys are not deficient literate; rather, they are differently literate. Girls who focus more on reading gather their knowledge from reading stuff, whereas boys who focus more on visuals gather their knowledge from TV and games etc. Barrs & Pidgeon (1998) study asserted that boys prefer non-fiction stuff for reading. Hence, their narration is different from that of girls. Another contribution to this idea was put forward by Kanaris (1999). He analyzed the writing of 8 to 10 years old boys and girls and found that girls use "WE", adjectives, dependent clauses, complex sentences and write in detail, whereas boys use "I", positioning themselves as participants and observers. Kanaris study put forward an interesting area for future research. She found the deeply embedded gender identities

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through written language. The picture of power and powerlessness in the written work of girls and boys will be more influential to study than the observation that girls are better than boys.

Another dimension in the study of boys' and girls' performances was the performance of the teacher in the classroom. The harsh judgement of teachers for boys made them perform badly. (Reeves, Boyle & Christie, 2001). It was found that teachers underrated boys' performances. Peterson and Kennedy (2006) found that teachers were more criticizing and made more corrections in the works of boys when they knew about the genders. But when they were not told about the genders of the written work given to them for assessment, it was found that they criticized the work of the girls more whose gender identity was concealed from teachers. In addition, girls considered themselves as achievers not because of their work but because of their good behaviour. Hence, approved literacies for both boys and girls resulted in undervaluing of what boys write (Whitelaw, Milosevic & Daniels, 2000).

The general perception that is also proved by the researchers about language and gender is that there is a consistent difference between the languages of both genders. The studies conducted on speech with reference to gender are more in number than the studies on writing and gender. Some of the studies on gender and writing focused on the writing skills in the First and the Second language settings, both academic and non-academic. These studies cover different areas of writing. Mulac et al (1990) focused on the difference between male and female essays at the primary and secondary level. Mulac and Lundell (1994) explored the difference of gender-linked language in the written discourse of adults. These studies were aimed to examine the differences in the language of both the sexes. Some of the studies (Mulac et al 1990; Mulac & Lundell 1994) focused on the same questions in the informal settings. Herring (1996) studied the differences between text electronic messaging with the variable of gender. This study was also based on an informal setting.

Punter and Burchell (1996) have studied the gender differences in English in the L1 setting and discovered that in imaginative, reflective and empathic writing, girls are better than boys, while in argumentative and factual writing, boys are better than girls. Brovsky (1999) study explored that girls are better than boys in this type of writings. The study explored the factors affecting the language of male and female. Romatowski & Trepanier Street (1987) also studied the differences between the language use of girls and boys and found that it lies in the perceptions and preferences of both genders in writing. They argued that girls tend to have positive feelings about writing, while boys feel negative about it. Due to these feelings, the differences in the writings of girls and boys take place. Meinhof (1997), on the other hand, found that both men and women writing style is similar. The study was based on the data gathered from narratives written by women and men. The participants were from three different social groups. The studies in the academic context showed that the narrative writings of academic women are different from their male counterparts. Narratives written by men were egocentric, while women wrote in a strongly self -reflective and evaluative manner.

Many studies are conducted in the field of gender in relation to language in the ESL setting. Sunderland (2000) and Morris (1998) explored the factors responsible for the differences between men and women writings. The study found that women were better at essay writing because they concentrate more on the given guidelines. Men did not perform well because they did not follow the guidelines as strictly as women do. It was found that the essays written by women are more accurately organized than those written by men, which resulted in making women score higher in the essay writing. The study conducted by Morris (1998) was criticized because it did not take social status, background and cultural aspects into account.

Kanaris (1999) also studied ESL writing and found that girls write longer and more complex sentences, which are full of subordinate clauses and adjectives of different types. The study also claimed that boys are inclined to use the personal pronoun "I" and girls use "we" which indicates that boys consider themselves as agents of their own writing while girls as participants and observers of the events going on in their narratives. Peterson (2002) studied 8th-grade students' writings and found that male students write in a powerful manner while female writers write in an emphatic manner. This approach of both the genders is present in their perception of what to write and how to write. Clarke (1994) explored the difference in writing styles of women studying in Oxford and Cambridge. He found that female students write in a conciliatory manner whereas male students preferred assertive, bold and argumentative style. This study focused on the gender difference in academic essay writing.

The topic for the essay was the same for both genders at the same level of ESL class. It is an attempt to find the difference in the writing style of Pakistani young male and female ESL learners.

Research Methodology

The study follows both qualitative and quantitative method of analysis

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical basis of the study is Joan Swann's (1992) concept of the difference between male and female language users. She believes that women language users follow the personal and reflective manner and use private (subjective) forms for language while men focus on facts and actions and use more public (objective) forms in their language use.

The concept is based on two aspects, i.e., manner and form. To find the manner of the learners writing, the sub-topics used by the learners to explain the main topic were analyzed. Secondly, to find out the subjective and objective forms, the use of personal pronouns used by the learners were explored.

Procedure

The study follows the interpretive paradigm with a mixed method. The data was gathered from the participants in the form of essay writing titled "Role of Media in our Lives". Participants were asked to write 200-250 words, and they were given 30 minutes for writing. The focus was on the ways the participants handled the topic and the way they expressed their views on it. The sub-topics used by the learners to explain the main topic were examined, and the use of personal pronouns was analyzed. Sub-topics were selected for analysis because they were indicative of the interest as well as the style of the participants, while personal pronouns expressed the type of writing, e.g. subjective or objective.

Analysis and Discussion

The participants discussed many sub-topics in their essays. Some were discussed by both, while some were exclusive to one gender. The data showed a big difference in the use of sub-topics by the participants. Only one sub-topic, "media as information," was discussed by both genders at almost the same level. Girls were found to be more interested in discussing showbiz, entertainment, interaction and negative aspects of media in our personal lives. Boys were more interested in discussing media's importance in the global world, politics, economy and current affairs. They have not discussed the interactive or social role of media in today's world. Girls discussed social media and the communicative value of media. Interestingly girls talked about the terrorism generated by the media, while boys did not discuss this topic at all. Girls discussed the role of media in educating the youth while boys only mentioned learning. They talked about learning in a general sense, not in the educational setting as girls did. All the boys wrote about political and global issues and the role of media in highlighting them, while none of the girls discussed the political value of the media. Girls, on the other hand, talked about dramas, films and cartoons as a source of information, education entertainment, and sometimes misguiding the public.

Eleven sub-topics were selected from the essays of the participants based on the frequency of their occurrence in the essays. The table shows the details about the usage of these sub-topics by participants in their essays. It shows the number of the participants and their gender against the sub-topic and then the percentage of usage by them. The table also gives the overall percentage of the usage of the sub-topics by both genders. It is also explicit from the table that girls used more subtopics than boys, who were restricted to a few sub-topics regarding media.

Table 1. Sub-Topics used by the Participants in their Essays

S. No	Topics	Boys (Out of 12)	%	Girls (Out of 12)	%	Overall %
1	Education	0	0%	8	67%	33%
2	Learning	3	25%	7	58%	42%

S. No	Topics	Boys (Out of 12)	%	Girls (Out of 12)	%	Overall %
3	Politics	8	67%	0	0%	33%
4	Global world	9	75%	0	0%	37%
5	Current Affairs	10	83%	2	17%	50%
6	Information	9	75%	10	83%	79%
7	Entertainment	3	25%	10	83%	54%
8	Showbiz	2	17%	10	83%	50%
9	Interaction	1	8%	9	75%	42%
10	Terrorism (media role)	0	0%	9	75%	37%
11	Social/Individual problems(disadvantages)	1	8%	7	58%	33%

The topics discussed by girls and ignored by boys are mostly reflective, highlighting personal interest and emotions. For example, showbiz, beauty products, food, dresses and so on. They talked about interaction and limited it to family and friends, which showed their reflective and subjective approach towards the topic. It is now proved that girls are better in the field of education than boys, and this is due to their interest in the field of education, which they showed in their essays as well. They feel media is a great help in education. They feel sorry for the young generation who is being spoiled by the negative role of media. The promotion of terrorism on media in both directions, as well as indirect form, hurt them, which is expressed in their essays. They also expressed their feelings about the role of media in promoting social problems like class distinction. This is missing in the essays written by the boys.

Boys mostly discussed the political and global value of media and talked about things more positively as compared to girls. They were much interested in global issues instead of individuals. They were interested in the political process, legislation, state issues and problems faced by the country, the position of Pakistan in world politics, economic issues, independence of media and so on. Boys were interested in current affairs instead of social problems and the individual value of media.

Education

The girls discussed education in the academic sense only. Boys, whenever mentioned education, took it in the sense of learning.

Entertainment

Girls talked about entertainment and related domains more than boys. However, boys talked about sports and games as a source of media entertainment.

Different Ways of Approaching the Same Topic

Some sub-topics are discussed by both genders, but their way of expression and handling the topic was very different from the other. This situation makes it explicit that there are major differences in the way both genders approach a topic.

Table 2. Same Sub-Topics Discussed by Both Genders in a Different Manner

Sub-titles	Boys	Girls
Entertainment	Sports, games	Dramas, cartoons, movies, jokes, stories
Education	In the sense of learning	In its academic sense
Information	About the world, political and state relate issues and updates about the whole world. About new inventions and online shopping. Current affairs	About showbiz, food, dresses, cosmetics, fashion and new trends in different fields News

Personal Pronouns

After the sub-topics, personal pronouns are analyzed. Personal pronouns are a very important source of the judgment of the style of writers. The table below shows the way personal pronouns were used by the participants in their essays to express their views. I selected six personal pronouns, which are used by the participants most of the time. Five of them are related to the first person, while one is for the third person. The table shows that girls used more forms of personal pronouns than boys, and they were inclined to use the first-person pronoun more than boys. The third-person pronoun, however, is used by boys more than girls.

Table 3. Use of Personal Pronouns in the Essays.

Pronouns	I	My	We	Us	Our	It	Total
Girls	27	12	51	15	12	27	144
Boys	0	0	39	3	3	57	102

In the essays, two types of personal pronouns were used.
1st person pronoun: I, my, we, us, ours.
3rd person pronoun: It

The first-person pronoun is subjective and is related to the feelings, emotions and thoughts of the writers, while the third-person pronoun is objective and is associated with the information which is neutral and non-subjective. The analysis showed that girls used the first-person pronoun excessively, and they wrote more in a subjective and reflective manner. On the other hand, boys were more inclined to write in the third person, which indicated that their writing is an account of the events and actions which they observed around them. They used either the third person pronoun "it" or named (media) to refer to the topic they were dealing with. The first person pronoun relates to the private forms of writing, while the third person pronoun is associated with the public forms of writing (Hyland, 2002). This shows that boys like to use public forms for writing on a topic while girls prefer to use private forms. The above analysis showed that girls write in a subjective and reflective manner while boys like to discuss actions and events. Boys tend to use a public form of writing than a private form of writing, which is common in girls.

Findings and conclusion

After analysis of the data, the study reveals that there is a major difference in the style of writing of both men and women in an ESL setting. Girls are more interested in writing about themselves and things related to their lives. They are emotional about the effects of media on children and youth. They talk about such topics in a morality struck tone. They are less interested in the matter of the world out of their lives. They have a sympathetic approach towards the things and people around them.

On the other side, boys are more interested in world affairs. They love to know what is going on around them. They also try to analyze the different matters in an objective and neutral way. They like to discover new information about the world around them at a broader level. Their interests are not limited to their own self and surroundings, but they are interested in discussing things from a global perspective.

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